



# NEWS RELEASE

Department of the Interior • Bureau of Land Management  
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**For Immediate Release**  
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**For Additional Information, Contact**  
Jonathan Smith or Mitchell Brookins 505-835-0412

## **Prescribed Burn Scheduled on Ladron Peak to Benefit Wildlife, Watershed**

The Bureau of Land Management plans to ignite up to 6,000 acres of federal lands on Ladron Peak in a prescribed burn scheduled to start on Saturday, May 31, and continue on Sunday. Weather permitting, the burn will occur on the top third of the peak and its eastern face, about 15 miles west of Bernardo, New Mexico, to improve habitat and watershed conditions for desert bighorn sheep, mule deer and other wildlife on the mountain.

The burn, to occur on public lands administered by the BLM and an area within the Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge, is not expected to exceed 5,000 acres because of sparse vegetation at lower elevations and a lack of fire-carrying grasses. There is a 40,000-acre buffer zone surrounding the burn area. The BLM, Fish and Wildlife Service and USDA-Forest Service will station a minimum of four fire engines at the base of the mountain as a safety precaution, along with 30 fire support personnel.

Much of the peak is steep and rocky, with inconsistent, patchy areas of mature, overgrown juniper and brush, mimicking an ecosystem that has experienced total fire suppression (where natural fires are not allowed to burn). "Habitat for wildlife has declined slowly but steadily because the ecosystem has lacked a natural fire regime," said Jonathan Smith, a fire management officer with the BLM in Socorro. "In the Western United States, almost a century of fire suppression has resulted in some unfortunate and unintended consequences -- dense, overgrown woodlands -- to the detriment of forest health and most species of wildlife."

On Ladron Peak, the goal is to decrease areas with a high density of mature juniper trees and rejuvenate grass and brush species, Smith added. Clearing out the thick stands of juniper will also help bighorn sheep avoid predators by improving their ability to see enemies such as mountain lions and provide improved forage by encouraging younger brush species to sprout.

According to Elise Goldstein, bighorn sheep biologist for the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, the biggest problem for desert bighorns on Ladron Peak is predation by cougars. "About 85 percent of our sheep mortality is caused by cougars," said Goldstein. "We had 35 desert bighorns on the peak in 1996 and last year there were less than 25. It's a major problem."

The burn will also reduce brush around spring sites on the southern and eastern flanks of Ladron Peak, increasing water sources for wildlife. The dry weather conditions of late May and early June are the optimal time to accomplish these objectives, and they are in line with New Mexico's natural fire regime, according to Smith.

The fire will be started via aerial ignition using a "helitorch" suspended below a helicopter. The helitorch will spew alumagel, a fiery mix of gasoline and a gelling agent on specific stands of overgrown vegetation. The end result will be a mosaic of burned areas and untouched pockets of brush and trees, greatly increasing biological diversity and ecological stability on the mountain.

BLM is working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, USDA-Forest Service, New Mexico Department of Game & Fish and the State Forestry Division, plus a fire crew from Bureau of Indian Affairs' Jicarilla Apache Tribe. Smoke from the burn may be visible as far away as Albuquerque this weekend. For safety reasons, the public will not be permitted to visit the area from May 30-June 10 (the portion of the burn on Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge is closed as well; the refuge is closed to public use).

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### **Assignment Editors:**

News media representatives will be able to travel to the helicopter staging area at the base of Ladron Peak, where the helitorch will be prepared and loaded with fuel. Print photographers will stay in this area or be escorted to adjacent areas on the base of the mountain, depending on BLM availability; photographers will need telephoto lenses.

News helicopters are welcome to cover this event, and we will provide opportunities for aerial shots of the helitorch starting burns on the mountain. Helicopters will land at the staging area and be subject to altitude and distance restrictions from the helitorch and the fire area.

Additional information about the burn is available by contacting Jonathan Smith or Mitchell Brookins, BLM-Socorro Field Office, 505-835-0412.

Call Hans Stuart or Na'ama Tubman, BLM-Santa Fe, at 505-438-7510 for directions to the burn and instructions for TV helicopter coverage. We will provide you with cell phone numbers in order to confirm that the burn will proceed as scheduled or if it will occur at a different time.

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